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MAKING DRY BONES STAND: LUTHERAN HIGHER EDUCATION AT CENTURY'S END

Diane Scholl

In my course on American literature to 1860, my students consider the implications of American pluralism, a prospect realized only dimly or not at all by John Winthrop when he delivered his famous "A Model of Christian Charity" on board the *Arbella* in 1630. This first text we read suggested a tall order for the American experience. Confident that his seasick and scurvy-ridden fellow passengers would soon unite the dry bones of the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel, he announced that Christian love will turn the human community of fractious political dissenters into the body of Christ, and while mercy and judgment, Gospel and law play their roles in his vision, his emphasis throughout his still-powerful sermon is on the transforming grace of Christ that enables an otherwise turbulent human community to live in peace and harmony.

And to many of my students, the prospect seemed an inviting one. Citizens of the year 2000, they work to establish a peaceful and harmonious community on campus, one that includes Norwegian-Americans and African-Americans, Nepalese and Nigerians, straight and gay, full-payers and the scholarship dependent. If all these elements in our midst represent scattered bones, the students endorse a unifying vision that will bring us together as one body. But their required stipulation is that such a corporate identity still encourages the expression of human individuality and freedom, sometimes to a degree that taxes and strains community norms and the commonality that unites us in a vision of Lutheran higher education.

Almost immediately Winthrop's noble and encouraging model of a Christian society in Massachusetts Bay Colony was put to the test. Antinomians such as Anne Hutchinson took issue with the Puritan clergy, and attracted a considerable following. Hutchinson held meetings in her home, originally for the women she had attended in childbirth with considerable skill and compassion, and later for men as well, including some of the major political leaders of the Colony. Charging that clergymen were preaching a covenant of works rather than the covenant of grace that Protestant dissenters had fought so hard to uphold and articulate, Hutchinson stirred up controversy that threatened the authority of soon-to-be Governor Winthrop. The truth is that the Puritan clergy, while rejecting the covenant of works and bristling at Hutchinson's charge, defended their jurisdiction to interpret the signs of justification exhibited by those colonists in

their congregations. Promoting sanctification as the sign of justification encouraged lawful and orderly behavior, and therefore had a certain utility, in the opinion of Hutchinson's persecutors. If it is true as her followers alleged that she encouraged resistance to the Pequot Wars conducted by the Colony to secure the safety of its citizens, she was all the more a threat to Winthrop's wishful "model of Christian charity."

Consequently, Winthrop's duty was to secure her banishment to Rhode Island, a sentence handed down in a civil hearing in November, 1637, and made final in March of the following year. But in her exiled state, a figurative Hagar in the wilderness, she proceeded to foment controversy among her new neighbors and eventually, a widow, removed her family to Long Island Sound where they suffered death at the hands of the Narragansett Indians. While some Puritan writers did not miss the opportunity to consider the providential nature of her demise, Winthrop tells a different story in his *Journal*. Hutchinson's daughter was taken into captivity by her mother's murderers, and when she was returned several years later to her surviving family, she had forgotten the language of English people. The consequences of Hutchinson's assault on civil order are loss of culture and consignment to a wilderness of depravity and disorder. So much for pluralism in Massachusetts Bay Colony.

My students considered the implications of American diversity through successive texts that chronicle the American experience. There is de Crevecoeur's American farmer, who blithely anticipates the eradication of divisive immigrant and sectarian differences, but is forced to acknowledge the brutal enslavement of Africans in the Deep South, and the lawlessness of American frontiersmen. Native Americans are beyond assimilation in his "melting pot." Olaudah Equiano (transformed as Gustavus Vasa) and Phyllis Wheatley survive the middle passage to adopt the names, the dress and letters of their captors, but hold out from them through the agency of their resistant and subversive voices. And by the middle of the nineteenth century, America awakening to its Renaissance, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all extol the unity in diversity implicit in the social fabric as well as in nature, difference subsumed in a vast, cosmic Oversoul, yet maintain a vision as private and individual as Emily Dickinson's white-gowned seclusion.

Strangely, we found the image of Ezekiel's dry bones runs throughout the course of American letters, even as the fragmented nature of American life proves all but beyond remediation. From Winthrop's initial charge, to Emerson's "Nature," to Melville's dark prophecy for race relations in *Benito Cereno*, the story of an unthinkable slave uprising on board a Spanish vessel, the dry, scattered bones appear as relics of a contentious and moribund past due for revitalization inspired by common vision and purpose. Yet each effort at renewal proves as divisive as the previous one, the effort to unite a corporate body an elusive goal. While America's motto "E Pluribus Unum" suggests one nation composed of many nations, creeds and perspectives, the necessary balance is so delicate as to be hard to preserve, and historically our past has been checkered by periods in which clamorous voices and outstretched hands have contended for their due.

On my campus, the students recognize a homogeneous core at the heart of our college's past, an identity that provides us with a powerful history and sense of community both. But their effort, and rightfully so, is to diversify, to make a place for difference, and to enrich the heritage we share. In our required first year course which deals in part with American ethnicity, we refer to America's emerging frontier as an "ethnic checkerboard," and point out the limitations of de Crevecoeur's "melting pot" metaphor, substituting the "salad bowl" or "quilt" concept instead. And the central question has been: How can Americans preserve the richness of our different traditions and resist the tendency to assimilate to a generic American identity? Can we represent ourselves as one nation in which many ethnicities enjoy their separate cultural history without fear of either assimilation or discrimination?

A walk across our campus will assure even the most casual visitor that we are not all Norwegian-Americans, though we might still share the vision of pioneer pastors who founded our college on the gifts of farmers and tradesmen hoping to educate their children in the classics, and enable them to take their place in American professions without losing their heritage and their language. But if our purpose for being has changed, enlarged to include students from more than a dozen nations and many different religious traditions, what is it that makes us still a community of believers, even the body of Christ? In my opinion there are four features to community life we share, and a fifth feature that provides the critical underpinnings to all of the others, without which, in fact, the community represented by a Lutheran college could not survive.

One is the commitment to the liberal arts, to the process of free inquiry and pursuit of knowledge, including important

texts from western and non-western traditions both that shape our sense of the academic enterprise and teach us to value as well as to challenge received opinion. There is a corollary commitment to rigor and the pursuit of excellence that manifests itself in classroom standards and in the public lectures and awards that recognize scholarly and humane contributions and their capacity for expanding human knowledge and solving problems that undermine our human potential. But this feature is shared by other academic institutions, and is, in fact, the reason for their existence. As an agent of community-building it is basic to what we do, yet not in itself sufficient to build a sustaining community.

Another feature is the political process that students, faculty, administration and board members participate in. Representation and participation give the different stakeholders in our corporate life a voice in the college's decision-making and future. Including different vested interests and perspectives opens the door to contention in political life, but also to change and renewal. The result of such a process is mutual "ownership" of the community we shape, but instead of simply "taking possession," each participating member of our constituency learns to "let go" as well, to relinquish self-interest in order to find a larger and more sustaining common good. Even in the disagreements that charge our deliberative life together with contention there is the hope of finding ourselves in a new and stronger body.

The third feature to shared life is the arts. On our campus, music draws us together in evident and remarkable ways, from the recitals that students give, to the concerts that mark Homecoming and Commencement weekend, and the Messiah production that has become a recognized tradition before Christmas, drawing together a massed choir of more than a thousand participants, including alumni and guests of the college. The arts permit us to shed the cloaks of our separate lives, affiliations, creeds and convictions, to enter figuratively and imaginatively a place in which we share aesthetic pleasure and can suspend the "separateness" that otherwise nourishes our identity.

Then there is the community of caring, the mutual concern that expresses a family's regard for all of its members and establishes commonality among people who came from separate places and will find their way in the world separately, but who will also find their way back to an institution that becomes part of their shared past. I recall our daily chapel service's announcement of news in "our life together": a death in someone's family, a new baby, a community program or appeal for help that reminds us of more than the space we inhabit together.

Finally, the fifth feature to community life is the recognition of difference and the right to dissent. Only by acknowledging the freedom of individuals to challenge the norms of community life and by accepting the fact that confrontation will cause some members to leave the community due to irreconcilable differences in perspective, can a community express its commonality. But this feature is highly problematic, since a community of dissenting voices can easily become a powder keg, its volatility not an opportunity for renewal but an agent of self-demolition.

Anne Hutchinson tested the capacity of Massachusetts Bay Colony to tolerate dissent and found a theocracy makes no place for those who testify to private revelation, self-designated prophets who threaten community with a vision as autocratic in its claims as the Puritan clergy who also served as magistrates, and handed down the harsh judgment of banishment. While Winthrop consigns her to the wilderness as a wandering Hagar, using biblical example to support his sentence of banishment, two hundred years later Nathaniel Hawthorne draws on Hutchinson's story in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne, an adulteress who refuses to name the father of her baby, is an "Antinomian" of a different stripe to be sure. The "A" emblazoned on her bosom with all the artistry of her needlework is intentionally ambiguous, and all the more so when later generations who note with admiration her faithful work among the sick and needy interpret the scarlet letter to stand for "Able." If such a transformation suggests the change in community standards and judgment over time, it speaks even more strongly of Hester's ability to take command of her situation and free herself from the radical extreme of private will and choice. While she remains obdurate in her silence concerning her child's paternity, the good works she does indicate her important compromise. Rather than seek her fortunes elsewhere, as she is sorely tempted to do when she and Dimmesdale converge in the dark forest where no one can see their shame, and plan their escape together, such a future is not really open to Hester, or to her clergyman lover who dies extolling God's mercy and its evidence in the punishment God exacts. Hester makes amends in the same community whose moral code she violated; in doing so, she suggests Hawthorne's resolution of the controversy engendered by Hutchinson with her radical reliance on grace, an extreme interpretation of the biblical covenant God contracted with Abraham.

It seems that Hawthorne intentionally avoids the sentence of banishment, either adjudicated by a court of law or self-imposed, for Hester Prynne's "crime." Rather, he suggests that faithful service and acknowledgement of community are possible even for a person who violates the community's norms, or sets herself against community

opinion. It is tempting to think that he sets the story of Anne Hutchinson right in comparing Hester Prynne obliquely to her predecessor, and even more tempting to believe that he addresses several radical extremes in his own nineteenth century America when he tells Hester's story.

What does *The Scarlet Letter* have to do with Lutheran colleges today? It underscores the very tension between conformity and diversity that we struggle with as we attempt to define a community fostered by the Lutheran faith that is flexible enough to engage in the creative and redeeming challenge of including difference. Unfortunately diversity has become a kind of "buzz word" on our campuses, a term that often lacks clarity, definition, and cogent reasons for implementing. "I'm sure diversity is a good thing," candid colleagues tell me, "but I have yet to hear compelling arguments for it." Other faculty members react unfavorably to the idea that we should recruit primarily international students and American students of color who are a good "fit" for our institution: "I hear you saying that we want to entice black students who are Christians to come, but not if they're Black Panthers," they complain, pleased at the absurdity and latent discrimination they see in such a position.

What does diversity mean to us, and is it more than an effort to include every variety of color and creed, an attempt to resemble the globe in the proportions with which its colorful people and different faith traditions are represented in our midst? Ernest Simmons in *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction for Faculty* addresses the central paradox of Luther's Reformation: that faith and life, Church and world, Christian and "other" be in "simultaneous tension" with one another, a simultaneity "that leads to mutual affirmations in tension" (33). It is this tension central to Lutheran higher education that gives the other features of common life together their meaning and purpose. Bruce Reichenbach in "Lutheran Identity and Diversity in Education" in this volume quotes Gilbert Meilaender as warning against the need to look "for something peculiarly Lutheran in higher education," a self-justification that can blindside us from recognizing the ecumenical implications to Luther's thought and the education we offer, an important consideration to remember. But in a sense every denominational college must justify its character and perspective on education, since without such definition denominational ties become a gratuitous tribute to an outworn past rather than a vital bringing of tradition into the future.

Lutheran colleges walk a tightrope with certain implicit pitfalls, as Simmons warns: "There is, of course, a danger

in this paradoxical or simultaneous view—namely that one can collapse into a form of dogmatic absolutism that does not recognize the integrity of the other, to accentuate the kingdom of God at the expense of the everyday world. Or one can go full speed into the everyday and collapse into some form of radical pluralism or thoroughgoing relativism” (34). Now it seems that if we are beyond the risk of promoting doctrinal orthodoxy at the expense of free intellectual inquiry at our colleges, we do veer toward the extreme of relativism, a valuing of difference for its own sake, without a recognition of how religious and ethnic pluralism on our campuses can ultimately enhance our common mission and fulfill a promise implicit in our Lutheran roots as well. This lack of reflection on our intrinsic regard for difference and commonality both, a regard rooted in the Lutheran tradition, elastic and controversial in its application, has led to serious misunderstandings of our nature and mission and could hasten our loss of core identity and commitment to denominational ties.

In the first-year common course at Luther, students read *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren*, a pioneer pastor's wife's account of settlement at Washington Prairie, Iowa, in 1853. Koren's witness to her “New World” experience demonstrates her eagerness to meet that world head-on; her pages fairly radiate with wonder at the Scots and French settlers, the Native Americans in their unfamiliar dress, the Yankees and Methodists who threaten the Norwegian-American community with assimilation and loss of cultural identity. Koren is curious and resistant both, as she well might be, since her enthusiasm for her at times paradisiacal setting and its new people is tempered by a certain realistic appraisal; she knows the pioneers' effort to establish their culture in a land of “difference” will mean some cultural moorings are severed. How she copes with such “simultaneity” is the story of Luther College, founded by pioneer pastors to bring the Lutheran faith and Norwegian heritage into dynamic tension with the world. While this dynamism makes us a changed place today, it can bring us closer to our theological underpinnings even as it enables us to participate in a global encounter, confronting ideas and experience that might not seem consistent with Lutheran orthodoxy.

When is diversity a threat to the very fabric of our being? “Difference” without a core theology and a set of defining values is doomed to produce a polyglot society that will have trouble functioning as a community, an environment in which respect for the liberal arts and commitment to excellence, shared political processes, life affirmed together through the arts, through mutual concern and support of its members, and through acknowledgment of the right to

dissent, flourish and sustain us. While it could be argued that Winthrop's failure to recognize the right to dissent, and his subsequent banishment of Anne Hutchinson from Massachusetts Bay Colony, signaled the death of the community he tried to make into the body of Christ in his effort to revivify the dry bones of Reformation sects and religious controversy, there is another imperative if community is to serve the needs of its members and function in the corporate sense. Dissenting individuals must respect the framing theological principles and corporate values of community, and their spirit of dissent must be one that nourishes the common good, rather than furthers an extreme of individualism and opposition. It is possible, of course, to speak on behalf of minority needs and still be fostering the idea of community in which different creeds and opinions are valued, indeed safeguarded; this vocalized concern is in fact one of the hallmarks of community life.

When a Pakistani or Somalian student questions Dante's placement of Mohammed in hell with the Sowers of Discord, and asks if other Christians believe that non-Christians are doomed infidels who deserve everlasting torments, a door to fruitful and provocative discussion opens. Such a student is right to name her incredulity and anger, and if the conversation leads to other issues concerning the perception of Islamic students on campus, the class is pushed farther to consider both the allegorical dimension to Dante's work and his medieval world view, and the climate at our college for those who profess other faiths. Why shouldn't a student question why we read the texts we do, and why we might make a case for their enduring value even when the sentiments they seem to express are disturbing to our sense of tolerance and unity? When a faculty member from a denomination making exclusivist claims to truth argues that our campus congregation's identification as “Reconciled in Christ” is unscriptural and flies in the face of biblical indictments of homosexuality, an opportunity arises for other voices to participate in defense of worship that fully includes gays and lesbians. In each case, the conversation runs the risk of becoming heated and alienating individuals; confrontation between those who espouse polarized points of view is a serious and sometimes painful engagement. But if our institutional commitment is to frame provocative questions and allow opposing voices to speak to each other fairly, such receptiveness to difference carries with it a necessary risk, a risk that ultimately strengthens community and revivifies it. Even the documents and position papers of the Lutheran church are open to review and criticism. The necessary stipulation is that the critic must respect the theological foundations of the college and understand the perspective that informs its academic enterprise. Students,

faculty, administration and board members, baptized, confirmed, creed-spouting believers or not, must have their appropriate reasons for accepting the call to community, and honor that call.

In our Lutheran colleges we bring together the scattered bones of a nation and world torn by racial prejudice, ethnic and religious warfare, and fragmented by dissonant opinions and ideologies. What does it take to make those dry bones live?

It takes a theological vision of our place in the Church and the world, a shaping perspective at the core of the education we offer and at the heart of our common enterprise as we live together, nurture and sustain each other. It takes individuals who choose to participate in community because they respect its identity, whether or not they are confessing Lutherans or share a Christian theological perspective. When a community honors "difference" and encourages the freedom to dissent, it empowers itself as well as those dissenting individuals who speak for an insistent number of community members who share in the goals of common life but reserve the right to maintain a position or creed in tension with the prevailing perspective. And when those individuals claim a place for themselves and even challenge the norms of community life, in a way that recognizes and respects the vision inspiring that community, a vision that draws and compels us to the life we share, the common good is fostered.

Is this the recognition with which Hawthorne graces Hester Prynne, as she makes the reparations that earn her a distinguished name? It should not be surprising that Hawthorne imbues Hester's defiant refusal to name her

child's father with silent heroism, or that he underscores her suggested passionate sexuality by giving her sumptuous dark hair that she allows to escape from her restraining cap when she meets Dimmesdale in the forest and urges him to escape with her from a rigid, uncompromising Puritan society. The figure of Hutchinson who shadows Hester's past, culled from Hawthorne's considerable reading in New England history, appears in *The Scarlet Letter* in a similarly ambiguous light, both as self-proclaimed prophetess and dangerous law-breaker, as an agent of grace and mercy and as a radical and dissident influence on a struggling society in need of the restraint that comes from a proper regard for the law. Hawthorne understands and dramatizes the attraction of individualism even as he witnesses to the need for order and submission to corporate identity.

The prophet Ezekiel foresees a community of differences reconciled when he testifies to God's restoring promise. We too can feel the inspiring breath of God on our scattered bones, can stand upon our feet, "an exceeding great host" (Ezekiel 37:10), though not without the necessary tension between individualism (strengthening in its potential to challenge and change community, terrifying in its capacity to dissolve uniting ties in factionalism and mutual recrimination), and the tradition, values, and articulation of common goals. This tension at the very heart of Reformation theology, as it is at the center of Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" and of Hawthorne's compelling novel, is what provides Lutheran higher education with its energy and character; it is our best legacy and our best hope for the future.

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